

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) will hold two public, on-the-record briefings on "Religious Freedom in Turkmenistan: the U.S. Response to One of the World's Worst Religious Freedom Violators." The first briefing will be held jointly with the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission) on Tuesday, May 11 in Russell Senate Office Building, Room 485, from 4:00 - 5:30 p.m. The briefing will be held again on Wednesday, May 12 at the offices of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 1201 Connecticut Ave., NW, from 3:30 - 5:00 p.m.

The briefings will examine the situation of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, particularly within the context of the U.S. government's current deliberations on designations of the worst religious freedom violators as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, as required by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. In March 2004, Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov issued a decree that purportedly will ease registration requirements for religious communities in Turkmenistan. However, the decree relates only to a narrow element of the registration law and to date, no religious communities have been registered as a result of the decree.

"Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive states in the world today, and its government regularly engages in severe and ongoing violations of religious freedom. The Commission has long recommended that Turkmenistan be named a CPC," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. "We are concerned that President Niyazov's pointedly timely move will encourage the Department of State to forego a CPC designation for Turkmenistan. This would be a mistake."

Confirmed participants at the briefings:

Najia Badykova, Research Associate at the George Washington University and former head of the Department of Economic Relations within the Turkmen government.

Felix Corley, editor of Forum 18 News Service, which reports on threats and actions against religious freedom in the former Soviet Bloc.

Lawrence Uzzell, president of International Religious Freedom Watch, an independent research center that reports on threats to freedom of conscience in totalitarian and authoritarian countries, and former head of the Keston Institute.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Dean Michael K. Young ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,